

## ARE CHARTER SCHOOLS EFFECTIVE?

### Background for the Study

Within the context of continual dissatisfaction with American public schools, charter school proponents view charter schools as a viable reform mechanism. At the heart of their reform potential is a degree of exemption from state bureaucratic and regulatory red tape which traditional public schools do not have (Sarason, 1998). This exemption would allow schools to tailor their programs and to experiment to attract and better serve students. As of spring 2003, forty states in the United States have enacted charter school legislation; 2,500 charter schools are operating. The numbers of schools established in each of the forty states varies from none in Iowa, New Hampshire, and Tennessee to well over two hundred in Arizona (Center for Education Reform, 2003).

The degree of freedom and autonomy afforded charter schools varies from state to state however. The Center for Education Reform conducts yearly rankings of state charter school laws based on ten criteria concerning charter school operations and their relationship to their chartering entity. The score for each state's charter school law is then assigned a letter grade and a classification as being either strong (encouraging the development of charter schools) or weak (discouraging the development of charter schools) (Center for Education Reform, 2003). In this way, states are categorized regarding the strength of their charter school statutes.

A strong charter school law encourages the development of charter schools within a state by: (a) permitting an unlimited or substantial number of charter schools; (b) allowing a number of entities in addition to the local school board to authorize charter schools; (c) permitting a variety of individuals and groups both inside and outside the existing public school system to start charter schools; (d) permitting new schools to start up from scratch; (e) permitting charter schools to be started without proving specified levels of local support; (f) providing automatic blanket waivers from most or all state education laws and regulations; (g) permitting charter schools to be independent legal entities; (h) guaranteeing 100 percent of per-pupil state funding to charter schools; (i) permitting charter schools to control their funds; and (j) giving charter schools complete control over personnel decisions (Center for Education Reform, 2003).

On the other hand, a weak charter school law controls the development of charter schools in a state by: (a) restricting the number of charter schools; (b) limiting the number of entities, such as the local school board, that can authorize charter schools; (c) limiting the variety of individuals and groups who can start charter schools; (d) permitting only existing public schools to be converted into charter schools; (e) requiring the demonstration of specified levels of support prior to the establishment of the charter school; (f) requiring or not allowing charter schools to apply to the chartering body for waivers from specific education laws and regulations; (g) requiring charter schools to be under the governance of the

local school district; (h) setting funding at levels less than 100 percent of per pupil funding in the state or by requiring negotiations for funding with the local school district; (i) allowing funds to only be disbursed through the local school district; and (j) requiring adherence to the local school district's collective bargaining agreements or work rules (Center for Education Reform, 2003).

With these degrees of freedom from red tape comes responsibility. Are charter schools effective? One means by which to address this question is the utilization of the effective schools research. In her 2002 *Phi Delta Kappan* article, Barbara Taylor finds that the effective schools process is "alive and well" (p. 375). She notes that the process and correlates of effective schools have been accepted as one of the approved comprehensive school reform models in the U.S. Department of Education's Comprehensive School Reform initiative. The process and correlates have also become the foundation for several school reform initiatives around the nation, including Phi Delta Kappa's National Center for Effective Schools, the California Center for Effective Schools, the Association for Effective Schools, and the National Alliance for Effective Schools.

Ron Edmonds' work with the New York City schools was one of the earliest attempts at applying the effective schools research to school improvement at the local level, and it provided a model for others to follow. Subsequently, a number of school improvement programs were implemented in cities around the country and the effective schools model was adopted by most state departments of education. At the same time, characteristics of effective schools began to evolve. While there were differences in details from one researcher to the next, common elements in all effective schools research included: a student achievement focus, an emphasis on all students, and a goal of mastery of basic skills (Mace-Matluck, 1987). Mace-Matluck (1986) offered a composite of definitions found in the literature: "An effective school is one in which the conditions are such that student achievement data show that all students evidence an acceptable minimum mastery of those essential skills that are prerequisite to success at the next level of schooling" (p. 5).

In three well-known summarizations (1979a, 1979b, 1981), Ron Edmonds maintains that there are five correlates of effective schools: (a) The leadership of the principal is characterized by substantial attention to the quality of instruction; (b) there is a pervasive and broadly understood instructional focus; (c) an orderly, safe climate exists that is conducive to teaching and learning; (d) teacher behaviors convey the expectation that all students are to obtain at least minimum mastery; and (e) pupil achievement is used as the measure for program evaluation. Edmonds used the term "correlate" arguing that each of the above ingredients is related to the others, that they are interactive, and that they are all present in effective schools (Mace-Matluck, 1987).

Other reviewers of the effective schools literature did not always find the same set of features to be characteristics of effective schools. This resulted in the compilation of somewhat different lists of features typically categorized as characteristics or variables. Most often-cited are reviews

by Tomlinson (1980), Austin (1979, 1981), Duckett, Park, and Clark (1980), and Purkey and Smith (1983) (Mace-Matluck, 1987).

Brookover and Lezotte (1979), Gauthier (1982), and Villanova (1984), among others, have honed the seven effective school correlates that are most widely accepted today (Levine & Lezotte, 1990). They are: (a) clearly stated and focused school mission; (b) high expectations for students, teachers, and administrators; (c) safe and orderly climate for learning; (d) instructional leadership by all administrators and staff members; (e) opportunity to learn and time-on-task; (f) frequent monitoring of student progress; and (g) positive home/school relations (Taylor, 2002, p. 377). The premise is that these correlates can effectively guide school improvement and reform.

### **Purposes of the Study**

The purposes of this study were (a) to compare the perceptions of charter school principals regarding the extent to which the effective school correlates have been implemented in their respective schools and (b) to compare the responses of charter school principals in states with strong charter school laws to the responses of charter school principals in states with weak charter school laws to determine if a relationship exists between the strength of a state's charter school law and the extent to which the effective school correlates have been implemented. Charter school principals were chosen to respond to the survey based on the overarching nature of the typical school principal's job, placing them in a better position to be knowledgeable about all facets of the school and operations than classroom teachers or other school employees.

The statistical hypotheses used in this study postulate equality among sub-population means. When asking the question "Do charter school principals in states with weak charter school laws and charter school principals in states with strong charter school laws differ with respect to the extent that they perceive their schools have implemented the effective school correlates?," the following statistical hypothesis was tested:  $H_0: \mu_1 = \mu_2$ . The mean for the distribution of responses for principals of charter schools in states with weak charter school laws is represented by  $\mu_1$ ; the mean for the distribution of responses for principals of charter schools in states with strong charter school laws is represented by  $\mu_2$ ; and the mean for the distribution of responses for all principals of charter schools is represented by  $H_0$ .

### **Methods**

#### *Sample and Sampling Procedures*

For the purposes of this investigation, the subjects were chosen from the principals or directors of all the nation's charter schools. In spite of the probable respondent bias, the researchers chose these subjects

because their positional perspective offers the most inclusive, general understanding of the schools' implementation of the Effective School Correlates.

The researchers gathered data from all forty states with charter schools operating during spring 2003. All 255 charter schools located in states with weak charter school laws, as determined by the rankings of the Center for Education Reform (2003), were selected for participation in the study. An equal number of charter schools were selected in a simple random sample from the 2441 charter schools located in states with strong charter school laws.

A total of 166 participants responded to the survey; 88 from principals of charter schools in states with weak charter school laws and 78 from principals of charter schools in states with strong charter school laws.

### *Measures*

Numerous surveys in the professional literature were considered as possible instruments for this study. Due to having a Cronbach alpha coefficient of .9051 and a history of successful utilization, the *Effective School Survey* (Holifield, 2002) was utilized. The instrument contained seven sections with each section corresponding to one of the seven effective school correlates: Instructional Focus (five indicators), High Expectations (four indicators), School Climate (four indicators), Instructional Leadership (six indicators), Time-on-Task (six indicators), Monitoring of Student Progress (three indicators), and School-Community Relations (three indicators).<sup>1</sup> Study participants noted the extent to which each correlate's indicators were implemented in their schools: 4 = Met very well, 3 = Generally met, 2 = Not met very well, 1 = Not met at all, 0 = Don't know. In determining the classification of the mean of means for each correlate and for the study as a whole, the following values were used: 3.50 and above was classified as "met very well," 2.50–3.49 was classified as "generally met," 1.50–2.49 was classified as "not met very well," 0.50–1.49 was classified as "not met at all," 0.49 and below was classified as "don't know."

Some survey items could be deemed "double-barreled" because they contain two or more variables that could arguably cause multiple interpretations of the items and produce inconsistent response patterns. The researchers believed this characteristic does not seriously detract from the validity of these items but more importantly does not detract from the study's conclusions regarding the relationship between charter schools and implementation of the effective school correlates. As previously noted, the survey has a Cronbach alpha coefficient of .9051 signifying internal consistency and suggesting a lack of inconsistent response patterns due to ambiguity. More importantly, the multiple embedded variables within an item are cognitively bundled as concomitant elements of a construct that would be very familiar in the everyday world of practice.

Data Analysis

SPSS statistical software was used to employ an Independent Samples *t*-test to determine the significant differences, if any, between the independent variables (schools in states with strong and weak charter school laws) and each of the study’s dependent variables, the survey items. Further data analysis of each of the effective school correlates was conducted by using subgroup mean scores. The mean scores for the entire survey were used to draw conclusions relative to the study’s hypothesis. Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances was used to determine differences in variation in the spread of responses between the two groups. The  $p \leq .05$  level of probability was used to note significance.

Findings

The findings of the study are presented in order by correlate. The table for each correlate contains the correlate itself (in parentheses after the title), the actual indicators from the survey instrument, the means for each sample group, and the mean of means for the correlate.

Instructional Focus

The Instructional Focus section of the survey (see Table 1) contained five indicators concerning the school’s purposes and goals. Weak-state principals reported that indicators 2 (variety of teaching models used) and 5 (periodic review of the school’s mission) were met very well while strong-state principals also reported indicator 5 as met very well. The mean of means for all indicators in the Instructional Focus Correlate was 3.30 for weak states and 3.23 for strong states indicating that both groups reported this correlate as generally met. There were no statistically significant differences noted.

**Table 1**  
*Results for Instructional Focus Correlate* (A clear instructional focus represents the school’s guiding purposes and goals)

Indicators	Weak-state means	Strong-state means
1. Learning goals and objectives, instructional strategies, activities, and resources, and student assessments are aligned.	3.42	3.46
2. Teachers use a variety of teaching models to address a variety of learning styles.	3.61	3.49

(continued)

**Table 1** (*continued*)

Indicators	Weak-state means	Strong-state means
3. Vertical and horizontal curricular alignment across grade levels and subjects.	3.07	2.94
4. Extra-curricular activities are guided by specific objectives and learner outcomes that contribute to accomplishing the school's mission.	2.73	2.68
5. The school's mission (i.e. goals and objectives) is periodically reviewed.	3.65	3.58
Mean of means	3.30	3.23

*High Expectations*

The High Expectations section of the survey (see Table 2) contained four indicators concerning the role of the school in removing obstacles to learning and in recognizing and rewarding strong performance. There were no statistically significant differences noted in the responses from weak-state principals and strong-state principals, with the responses indicating that these indicators were at least generally met. Weak-state principals reported that indicator 7, concerning meeting the diverse needs of students, was met very well. The mean of means for the High Expectations Correlate was 3.19 for weak states and 3.22 for strong states indicating that both groups reported this correlate to be generally met.

**Table 2**

*Results for High Expectations Correlate* (All students are expected to attain mastery of essential school skills)

Indicators	Weak-state means	Strong-state means
6. Excellence in achievement and behavior inclusive of students, teachers, administrators, and staff is recognized via awards that have explicit requirements.	2.94	3.12
7. Individual student differences in interest, probable needs, special aptitudes, and ability are addressed, especially via enrichment and remediation activities.	3.52	3.46

(*continued*)

**Table 2** (*continued*)

Indicators	Weak-state means	Strong-state means
8. Established policies and procedures contribute to teacher efficacy regarding utilization of social services.	2.95	2.87
9. Mastery criteria regarding assignments are clearly communicated to students.	3.36	3.41
Mean of means	3.19	3.22

### *School Climate*

The School Climate section of the survey (see Table 3) contained four indicators dealing with establishing a school environment that supports academic performance. There were no statistically significant differences noted between the responses of weak-state principals and strong-state principals with the means for both groups indicating that indicators 10 (well-maintained physical facilities) and 11 (consistent discipline plans) were very well met, and that indicators 12 (classroom discipline plans) and 13 (induction programs) were generally met. The mean of means for the School Climate Correlate was 3.38 for weak states and 3.41 for strong states indicating both groups generally met this correlate.

**Table 3**

*Results for School Climate Correlate* (The school has a purposeful, businesslike atmosphere that is not oppressive)

Indicators	Weak-state means	Strong-state means
10. Physical facilities are well maintained, kept clean, and reasonably attractive.	3.56	3.63
11. Discipline plans—established through collaboration with appropriate stakeholders—are communicated and consistently implemented.	3.50	3.53
12. Individual classroom discipline plans operationalize the building discipline plan, which in turn operationalizes the district discipline plan.	3.27	3.47
13. Induction programs are implemented for new faculty and students.	3.17	3.01
Mean of means	3.38	3.41

### *Instructional Leadership*

The Instructional Leadership section of the survey (see Table 4) contained six indicators concerning the role of leaders in the instructional program of the school. As with the previous correlates, there were no statistically significant differences noted between the responses from the two groups with the means for both indicating that each indicator was at least generally met. Both groups reported that indicator 18 (Leader facilitation of in-service and mentoring) was met very well. The mean of means for the Instructional Leadership Correlate was 3.37 for weak states and 3.31 for strong states indicating that both groups generally met this correlate.

**Table 4**

*Results for Instructional Leadership Correlate* (Leaders understand and apply the characteristics of instructional effectiveness in the management of the instructional program)

Indicators	Weak-state means	Strong-state means
14. Teacher supervision focuses on instruction and learning and results in thoughtful, constructive, research-based feedback.	3.44	3.31
15. Data from multiple types of assessments are used to assess personnel.	3.00	3.03
16. Supervisory visits to classrooms to observe instruction are frequent and focused on teachers' instructional needs.	3.34	3.27
17. Leaders ensure that improvement goals and objectives are collaboratively established, implemented, and assessed.	3.44	3.36
18. Leaders facilitate in-service and mentoring activities that are aligned with school improvement goals.	3.51	3.54
19. Leaders use established procedures and quality criteria for recruiting teachers.	3.49	3.32
Mean of means	3.37	3.31

### *Time-on-Task*

The Time-on-Task section of the survey included six indicators concerned with the school's ability to provide unimpeded blocks of time for instruction and how teachers and students use that time. There were no



statistically significant differences noted for indicators 20–24 between the responses for weak and strong states. Means for both groups indicated that indicators 20 and 21 were generally met and indicators 22, 23, and 24 were met very well. A statistically significant difference was noted in the responses to indicator 25 (extra help for students) at the  $p = .020$  level of significance with the mean for weak states indicating the item was met very well and the mean for strong states indicating it was generally met. The mean of means for the Time-on-Task Correlate was 3.55 for weak states indicating this correlate was met very well and 3.43 for strong states indicating this correlate was generally met.

**Table 5**

*Results for Time-on-Task Correlate* (Multiple strategies ensure students are, for a high percentage of time, actively engaged in learning)

Indicators	Weak-state means	Strong-state means
20. The school uses a multi-faceted program to maintain a high level of student attendance.	3.40	3.21
21. Teachers and administrators practice management and supervisory techniques that keep students on task and minimize disruptions.	3.45	3.45
22. Students are engaged during the vast majority of class time.	3.61	3.62
23. School events are scheduled to avoid disruption of learning time.	3.58	3.54
24. Student pullouts for academic or non-academic purposes from regular classes are minimized.	3.70	3.54
25. Students can get extra help from school outside regular hours.	3.56	3.23
Mean of means	3.55	3.43

#### *Monitoring of Student Progress*

The survey addressed the correlate on Monitoring of Student Progress through three indicators of how assessment procedures are used to improve student achievement and the instructional program (see Table 6). The means for both weak-state and strong-state principals indicated that Indicator 26 (multiple assessments) was met very well while Indicators 27 and 28 were generally met. The mean of means for the Monitoring of Student Progress Correlate was 3.39 for weak states and 3.40 for strong states indicating that both groups generally met this correlate. There were no statistically significant differences.

**Table 6**

*Results for Monitoring of Student Progress Correlate* (A variety of student assessment procedures are used to improve individual student achievement as well as the instructional program)

Indicators	Weak-state means	Strong-state means
26. Data from multiple types of assessments are used to assess students' academic progress.	3.57	3.59
27. The school analyzes the performance and progress of specific groups of students to assure that all are learning well.	3.28	3.38
28. Testing results are used directly to assess the instructional program, objectives, materials, and the behavior of personnel.	3.31	3.24
Mean of means	3.39	3.40

#### *School-Community Relations*

The portion of the survey devoted to the School-Community Relations Correlate (see Table 7) contained three indicators dealing with how the school communicates with and involves parents in the education of their children. The means for both weak-state and strong-state principals indicate that these three indicators were all generally met. The mean of means for the School-Community Relations Correlate was 3.35 for weak states and 3.22 for strong states indicating that both groups generally met this correlate. There were no statistically significant differences.

**Table 7**

*Results for School-Community Relations Correlate* (Parents are given multiple opportunities to play important roles in helping the school to achieve its mission)

Indicators	Weak-state means	Strong-state means
29. A planned school-community relations program is continually utilized by the school.	3.25	3.01
30. Parents have various options for becoming involved in making decisions regarding schooling, especially in the development and support of the instructional program.	3.36	3.19

(continued)

**Table 7** (*continued*)

Indicators	Weak-state means	Strong-state means
31. Faculty provide parents with information and techniques for helping students learn.	3.45	3.46
Mean of means	3.35	3.22

*Summary of Effective Schools Correlates*

The mean of means for all correlates was 3.36 for weak states and 3.32 for strong states indicating that both groups generally met all effective school correlates.

**Conclusions**

Several conclusions can be made based on the reported perceptions of the study's respondents. The null hypothesis cannot be rejected. The Effective Schools Correlates are, at the least, "generally met" in charter schools in both strong and weak states. In spite of the greater degree of freedom from bureaucratic red tape, the charter schools have not, in general, implemented the correlate indicators of this study's survey to the "met well" level. However, most of these schools are, most of the time, utilizing the behaviors implicit in this survey's indicators. The researchers do not know if this level of implementation would be significantly different from non-charter public schools.

Nevertheless, the relative strength or weakness of a state's charter school law appears, at least from the perceptions of charter school principals, to have little, if any, impact on the extent to which the effective schools correlates are implemented in their schools. In fact, the only significant difference in perceptions pertained to Indicator 25 of the Time-on-Task Correlate regarding the availability of extra help for students from the school outside regular hours; respondents from weak states met the condition of the descriptor very well while strong-state respondents generally met the condition. Perhaps policymakers should note that the design and effectiveness of charter school programs and procedures may be independent of the degree of expansiveness or restrictiveness of the charter school laws.

The lack of significant differences in responses from the two groups may result from several factors. Respondent bias, whether conscious or unconscious, is a well-known limitation of self-reporting survey research (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996) and may have caused inflated responses from one or both groups. Also, the sample group, charter school principals, may be too narrow in scope and limited to a population that is likely to think along similar lines.

### Recommendations

The following are recommendations for further investigation: (a) Replicate this study utilizing the population of classroom teachers and students in charter schools located in both strong and weak charter school law states to determine if their perceptions differ from those of the subjects of this study; (b) conduct a qualitative study of the extent to which the Effective Schools Correlates have been implemented in charter schools using various stakeholders as the subjects; and (c) conduct a study to compare and contrast the extent to which non-charter and charter schools implement the effective school correlates.

### Note

<sup>1</sup>Indicators for the *Effective Schools Survey* used in this research were developed from the following resources: *Arkansas COE-Teacher Survey* (North Central Association, n.d.); *Characteristics of Effective Schools* (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 1985); *The Effective Education Series* (Colorado Department of Education, 1986); *An Administrator's Guide for Evaluating Programs and Personnel* (DeRoche, 1981); *Kelwynn's Staff Development for Effective Schools: Cadre Training Manual for School Improvement Teams* (Human Synergistics, 1985); *Educational Administration: Concepts and Practices* (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 1991); *Ventures in Good Schooling* (NASSP/NEA, 1986); *The Newark, New Jersey, School Effectiveness Questionnaire* (Camden Middle School, 1985); *The Development of a Survey of School Effectiveness* (Ruhl, 1985); and *Ready Schools* (Shore, 1998).

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